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From "learning about" to "learning to be" in the National Curriculum for Primary Schools

Ivan (Bulie) Amelia Orlandina*^a, Marin Elena^a^a*Faculty of Psychology and Educational Science, University of Bucharest, 90 Panduri Road, 50663, Bucharest, Romania*

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show the importance of the development of attitudes and values in young students as well as ways in which the newly-developed Romanian curriculum for Personal Development can be implemented. A study case was conducted in a school where a similar curriculum has been implemented and was focused on possible teaching and learning strategies related to this subject area. Our conclusion is that this subject area gives the students the opportunity to gain knowledge that is relevant, to develop an understanding of concepts which allows them to make connections throughout their learning.

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1. The importance of Personal Development in improving the quality and effectiveness of the education systems

Today's schools need to educate for the future more than ever before, as the world's challenges and opportunities become more compelling. "The responsibility of educators is no longer just to prepare good mathematicians, good biologists or good historians. The mission of schools is to prepare young people—the decision makers of tomorrow—to live in a complex multicultural society undergoing a rapid process of change and opening up a new world order. Of course, the cognitive component of an educational system is fundamental for the acquisition of

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +40721 379 791;
E-mail address: orlandina.bulie@marktwainschool.ro

intellectual and professional skills. Even more important is the acquisition of attitudes in the learning process in a context of cultural exchanges.”(Renaud, 1991)

A UNESCO report in 1996 underlined the importance of the necessity to adapt education so that that it can equip people to do the types of work needed in the future. This means that education has to take into consideration the fact that the future hinges on “the ability to turn advances in knowledge into innovations that will generate new businesses and new jobs”. Its aim should be “the complete fulfilment of man, in all the richness of his personality, the complexity of his forms of expression and his various commitments - as individual, member of a family and of a community, citizen and producer, inventor of techniques and creative dreamer”. (UNESCO, 1996)

In this sense, many educational systems all over the world have developed curriculum documents for a subject area that aims at helping students develop certain values and attitudes that they will need throughout life as personal, social and emotional development is now widely recognized as one of the building blocks of success in life.

The subject area of Personal Development contributes to the students’ overall development. Its syllabus takes into consideration the physical, cognitive, affective, social, moral and spiritual dimensions of the students’ growth, and guides them toward an awareness of how these dimensions are related and how important they are for each student’s personal development.

Professor Bob Aubrey declared that “personal development includes activities that improve awareness and identity, develop talents and potential, build human capital and facilitate employability, enhance quality of life and contribute to the realization of dreams and aspirations.[...] When personal development takes place in the context of institutions, it refers to the methods, programs, tools, techniques, and assessment systems that support human development at the individual level in organizations.” (Aubrey, 2010)

The learning acquired through this subject enables students to acknowledge values such as commitment, self-affirmation, solidarity, equality and dignity, and to integrate them into their relationships with others and with the environment. It also facilitates the development of attitudes such as self-confidence, trust in others, courage, work ethic, and desire to surpass oneself, independence and a sense of responsibility.

2. Introduction to the Personal Development Subject Area in the Romanian Curriculum

The Ministry of Education has developed a new syllabus for primary students that will be applied in schools as of September 2013 at the levels of the Preparatory Class, Grade 1 and Grade 2. The new subject called *Personal Development* is designed for students aged 6 to 8 is focused on building pupils’ resilience to deal with challenges and to provide the foundations on which lifelong learning can be built.

Personal Development is one of the six key learning areas in the Romanian primary curriculum. This syllabus makes a unique contribution to the school curriculum in that it is directly concerned with supporting the development of a pupil as a whole person. Its implementation has the potential to contribute to improved and ongoing quality of life for all individuals within the community.

The syllabus is designed to give all schools the flexibility to treat sensitive and controversial issues in a manner reflective of their own ethos. While the selection of specific programme content and learning approaches is to occur at the school level, learning experiences must be drawn from all strands in each stage.

The subject area of Personal Development enables primary students to develop their full potential, to reflect and work on themselves, to understand themselves, to recognize their true values, and to take action in order to make improvements in various dimensions of their lives. Furthermore, this subject area encourages primary students to interact with others, to take an interest in other cultures and to appreciate their diversity.

The new syllabus is intended to provide support and guidance for teachers delivering the Personal Development area of learning within the Romanian Curriculum. This syllabus contains suggestions for activities, suggestions that can be used for teachers in planning a lesson. The suggested activities lend themselves to both individual and group learning tasks, and they provide suitable opportunities for the development of a range of skills. The suggested activities can be adapted to the students’ levels of understanding and can vary from practical, hands-on activities to more theoretical activities.

3. Research objectives and methods:

This present research is based on a qualitative approach that has been used in order to reveal possible practical strategies and tools that can be adapted and used successfully in order to implement the newly developed syllabus for Personal Development.

The research methods we have used are the study of the official curriculum documents related to Personal Development, which is presented above, in Part 2 of the present article, as well as a case study conducted in a school where a similar curriculum has been implemented for more than nine years. The case study is focused on teaching and learning strategies and learning engagements that are used in this school in relation to Personal Development and is based on school documents, interviews with teachers and artefacts.

4. Participants

The present study case was conducted on primary school students at the Mark Twain International School of Bucharest. They have benefited from the implementation of this curriculum for more than 9 years due to the authorisation given to the school by the International Baccalaureate (IB) to implement its three programmes – the Primary Years Programme, the Middle Years Programme and the Diploma Programme. This present case study is focused only on the implementation of the first programme, the Primary Years Programme.

5. Case study

5.1. *The portrait of the programme - revealing the methods, tools and techniques used in schools where a personal development syllabus is applied*

In order to support the development of proactive citizens of the world the International Baccalaureate (IB) has developed a Scope and Sequence document for *Personal, Social and Physical Development*. This document is framed around conceptual understandings and learning outcomes related to active living, human interactions, collaboration, self-identity and appreciation, respect for self and others, etc. The IB states that The Personal, Social and Physical Development subject area can be approached in an integrative manner, with concepts and topics studied in a transdisciplinary or a disciplinary manner according to the students' needs and interests as well as to the school context and culture.

In line with the IB philosophy, the students at the school gain knowledge from various fields but this is not an end in and for itself. The bodies of information that they acquire become tools that the students need and use in order to gain conceptual understanding about the topics at hand and to develop a set of values and attitudes to use throughout their lives. The Primary Years Programme (PYP) of the International Baccalaureate, aimed at children aged between 3 and 12 years old, advocates a cycle of involvement that provides students with opportunities to engage in purposeful and beneficial action, some of which may involve service to fellow students or the school community. Through the implementation of the Primary Years Programme of the IB, as of the age of 3, the students are exposed to opportunities for the development of personal, social and physical well-being through relevant learning engagements that are based on realistic contexts and bring the life outside within the classroom environment. Values and attitudes permeate their learning with students being exposed to opportunities to learn about respect, appreciation, commitment, cooperation, enthusiasm, empathy, open-mindedness, tolerance, etc. Moreover, day-to-day experiences can be used as a starting point for discussions and reflections about such values. When a young student shares a toy or helps a classmate tie his shoelaces it is more than natural to begin a conversation about what to be caring means and how important this attitude is in order to build strong relationships within communities of people.

Values and attitudes can be identified in the behaviour of different characters in stories read aloud to young children or read independently by primary school students. They can also compare and contrast characters with reference to certain values or even use metacognitive strategies in order to self-assess their behaviour and performance throughout an activity, a project, a field trip or a week of study.

Furthermore, values and attitudes can also be infused within units of inquiry focused on Science. When students learn about the states of water, about the water cycle or about water distribution around the planet, there are also opportunities for them to learn about water shortage and about our responsibility towards keeping the water clean or not wasting it as it is a valuable source for humans and living things. Although focused on Science, the unit lends itself towards developing attitudes and values such as appreciation of the beauty and wonders of the world, curiosity about how the physical world functions, respect toward to world around and responsibility related to the way we preserve our environment.

As described above, a curriculum related to Personal Development can be approached in a transdisciplinary manner. This is beneficial to the students in the primary years of education as it offers them the opportunity to acquire skills in context, and to explore content that is relevant to them and that transcends the boundaries of the traditional subjects. In this sense, we move the emphasis from curriculum coverage which undermines learning and understanding to authentic learning that will help students become more enduringly skilful.

One of the culminating experiences of the primary school students at the Mark Twain International School is called the Primary Years Programme Exhibition. It represents a transdisciplinary inquiry conducted in the spirit of personal and shared responsibility, as well as a summative assessment activity that is a celebration as students move from the primary years into the middle years of their schooling. Students are required to engage in a collaborative, transdisciplinary inquiry process that involves them in identifying, investigating and offering solutions to real-life issues or problems while using the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values they have acquired during the primary years of study.

The first step of the process is to identify together with the students real problems that the local community, our country or the world faces. Based on their findings, the students are grouped according to their interest in a particular topic that they want to research. Throughout the years, there have been topics such as human discrimination with focus on the Roma people in Romania, peace and conflict, equal opportunities in education, world resources and our responsibility related to them, the impact of the internet upon people's lives, etc. With support from the classroom teachers and other teachers at the school who become mentors of the groups, the students write a central idea which must be of sufficient scope and significance to permit a detailed investigation and lines of inquiry that will drive their research.

Throughout the process, students are invited to investigate significant issues by formulating their own questions, designing their own inquiries, assessing the various means available to support their inquiries, and proceeding with research, experimentation, observation and analysis that will help them in finding their own responses to the issues. They study first hand sources, invite guest speakers, take interviews, design questionnaires and interpret their findings, talk to people far way using the newly developed technological media in order to find various perspectives upon the same issues, analyze information in books and encyclopaedias or visit museums.

5.2. An innovative way of assessment

One important step for the students is to assess the relevance of the information they have gathered and then to synthesize and organize it in a way that can be presented to a large audience made up of the entire school community, including younger students from the Preparatory class through Grade 3 as well as adults such as teachers, parents or administrators. The students are required to use different media to present their findings including digital projects and presentations, 3-D models or artistic performances.

The action component is very important within the process and the Exhibition offers the students the challenge, opportunity and power to choose actions, to act in accordance and to reflect on them, to display comprehensive attitudes and solid learning skills in order to make a difference for themselves and other human beings. Such action can include trying to educate the community in what regards a wise use of the internet or to make others aware of the impact of our daily actions upon the environment. Making a plan for how to use plastic and paper wisely at the school, inviting children in need to spend a day at the school and have fun, raising funds or various objects for them, going together to the theatre or to the park have been actions that the students have taken as part of their inquiry during the PYP Exhibition.

Good organization and solid cooperation are expectations that students fully adhere to. By working with aids such as the inquiry planner and contract, the exhibition timeline, the group's timeline, the reflection journal and by collaborating closely, the students are able to complete their work in time.

The assessment of the PYP Exhibition takes two forms: firstly, on-going assessment of each individual student's contribution to and understanding of the exhibition; secondly, a summative assessment and reflection on the event itself. When assessing, teachers take into consideration several criteria such as: group skills, time management, quality of reflections in student journals, self-management, inquiry skills, relevance and organization of information as well as presentation skills. The whole process of the Exhibition includes values and attitudes which permeate its stages from choosing a real-world problem to be researched to doing the investigation and taking action as a result of their learning.

6. Conclusion

The Romanian educational system has come to another level of understanding of how to create a system that is based on student centered teaching and learning. The importance of teaching personal development in primary schools is sustained not only in a theoretical way, through the new Romanian syllabus, but also through different schools programmes that have benefited from the implementation of this curriculum for almost a decade.

Throughout the present case study it was revealed that, if teachers approach the syllabus content from an integrated perspective, students are given the opportunity to gain knowledge that is relevant, to develop an understanding of concepts which allows them to make connections throughout their learning, to acquire transdisciplinary and disciplinary skills and also to take action as a result of their learning. The strategies that the teachers at the Mark Twain International School have used in order to implement the curriculum aimed at personal development can be considered as a starting point for teachers beginning to implement the newly developed curriculum for the Preparatory Class, Grade 1 and Grade 2. The methodology can be adapted to suit their students' needs, abilities and interests with a view to reaching the objectives stated in the official document in an integrated and innovative manner.

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